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PHILLIPS BROOKS AND GERMAN PREACHING

BY FRANCIS G. PEABODY

PHILLIPS BROOKS died just twenty years ago, on January 23, 1893. It is difficult for those who listened to him with such profound emotion to realize that a new generation has arrived, which, if it reads his sermons at all, cannot hear in them the searching cadences and torrential energy which moved every heart. "He rose," Mr. Bryce once said, "in his first few sentences like a strong-winged bird, into a serene atmosphere of meditation, stilling and thrilling the crowd. The listeners never thought of style or manner, but only of the substance of the thought. They were entranced and carried out of themselves by the strength and sweetness and beauty of the aspects of religious truth which he presented." To those who thus remember him he will always be the prince of preachers; and they hear with something like consternation the comments of younger readers who are inclined to find Phillips Brooks fanciful, exuberant, or diffuse.

Much, it must be admitted, has happened in these few years to diminish general interest in his message. The social interpretation of religion, which is now so compelling, was hardly approached by him. It is true that in one chapter of the volume which his biographer regards as the most important of his writings, the *Lectures on the Influence of Jesus*, the correlation of Christianity with social service is foreshadowed and welcomed; yet these lectures, partly perhaps because of their academic form, have never received the general attention which they still deserve. The overwhelming effect of his preaching has obscured the importance of this theological confession; and his preaching, it must be admitted, does not strike the note which is domi-

nant to-day. He was primarily, not a reformer, but a revealer. He lived at the end of the nineteenth century rather than at the beginning of the twentieth. His message was not so much of the duty of man in the service of the world as of the life of God in the soul of man.

The movement of ecclesiastical interest during the last twenty years has contributed to this decline of Brooks's authority. He was in his theology an Evangelical and in his practice a broad Churchman; and both in the Church of England and in the Protestant Episcopal Church, to which he was so loyally devoted, neither the Evangelical nor the Broad Church party is now in control. Phillips Brooks had indeed little interest in any ecclesiastical movement. The Christian Church was to him a means rather than an end. "I care less and less for organization," he said when on the point of being made a bishop. His supreme concern was for the individual soul. He had what the author of *Ecce Homo* called, in Jesus Christ, a passion for personality; and this search for the one sheep that was lost made him, as it made his Master, indifferent to distinctions which to many of his brethren seemed of vital concern. Questions of priesthood or ritual, the assumption of a new title by his communion as the American Church—in short, the whole structure of exclusive authority and tradition—seemed to him an unauthorized limitation of the grace of God; and as the movement toward a "Catholic" position has advanced, it has left Phillips Brooks behind, or at least on one side.

This obscuration of his teaching has been increased, so far as Boston is concerned, by the nature of the monument erected to commemorate his work; and it is certainly one of the ironies of local history that before the Church which still echoes with his words there should stand a memorial which so ingeniously misrepresents him. Dismissing from consideration the problems of art which this much-discussed statue has provoked—whether the symbolic Christ dwarfs the preacher's figure, whether the canopy crushes the group, or whether the anatomy is faulty—what must future generations conclude from the study of this statue concerning the preacher's manner and method? A boyish, not to say bumptious, orator, thickset and stumpy, is brandishing his right arm with a hortatory gesture, while behind him a veiled Christ is directing his message. Could anything be more

unacceptable to Phillips Brooks than such an interpretation of his purpose? No hearer, it is safe to say, ever saw him in the attitude portrayed. He rarely used any gesture, save the quick toss of the head and the pressure of the hand against his side. His weapon of communication was not the brandishing arm, but the flashing eye. He scorned the arts of oratory and practised the higher art of restraint. It would be as reasonable to portray a rushing river making conscious gestures as to represent Phillips Brooks in an oratorical pose. As to the veiled Christ, it may be fairly said that the preaching of Phillips Brooks was habitually directed to free the Church from so ghostly and dehumanized a conception of its Master. The veil, he might have said with the Apostle Paul, is "taken away at the reading of the New Testament." If the symbolism of this ascetic figure, instead of suggesting, as is intended, the inspiration of the preacher, were designed to indicate a fruitless attempt to detain him in the grasp of mediævalism, it would be more consistent with the facts. To compare this veiled figure with Brooks's teaching on "The influence of Jesus" is like passing from darkness to dawn.

It may be still further urged that the decline in Brooks's influence is due to the special limitations of his work, and that a preacher must anticipate the fate of temporariness. The more immediate and personal his message is, the more transient may be its reputation. When one recalls the history of the pulpit in New England during the nineteenth century, he may not unreasonably conclude that out of the thousands of preachers who have faithfully served their generations only two names survive which represent permanent contributions to religious progress. Channing and Bushnell dealt habitually with great themes on a great scale. The nature of God and man, the dignity of human nature and its ruins, the evidences of Christianity, and the intimations of immortality—sermons on themes like these, preached by great masters, became not so much contemporary influences as historical monuments. These exceptions, however, seem to prove the rule concerning preaching. The vast majority of preachers must be content to have their day and cease to be; to live by faith in that occasional alchemy which transforms preaching into character and makes a word into flesh. Sermons are prepared, not to be read, but to be heard. The touch of personality and intimacy which may give a ser-

mon its immediate authority is precisely what the reader, beyond the reach of eye or voice, may not be able to feel. No literature is likely to become more desiccated than the volumes of sermons, whose publication grateful parishioners promote, leaving to their children the pious duty of transferring to the nearest theological library their uncut and dusty copies, as if in obedience to the maxim which has been suggested as a guide to modern charity: Give what you do not want to others who do not want it. The difference between readers and hearers may be illustrated, even in the case of Phillips Brooks, by the impression which he made on reviewers and on listeners in England. In October, 1884, the London *Spectator*, in a somewhat patronizing notice of his printed sermons, said:

"Mr. Brooks's whole treatment of religion is too fanciful and casual; . . . he gives much that is valuable, much that is wise, much that is ingenious and thoughtful, but he does not strengthen the foundations of religious thought. Mr. Brooks is a fine preacher of the second class."

It was, however, but a few years before British hearers came to share the judgment of the United States and great congregations hung on his words with such passionate interest that in 1890 Professor A. B. Bruce, of Glasgow, on being asked how Brooks should be compared with English preachers, said:

"It is this way: Our great preachers take into the pulpit a bucket full, or half full, of the word of God and then by the force of personal mechanism they attempt to carry it to the congregation. But this man is just a great water-main attached to the everlasting reservoir of God's truth and grace and love; and streams of life, by a heavenly gravitation, pour through him to refresh every weary soul."

Must it, then, be inferred that the type of preaching, of which Brooks was so supreme a master, is to be permanently displaced? Do the new needs of a new century demand a new kind of appeal? Has this message to the individual lost its force in an era of associated action and social remedies? Will congregations listen to nothing but the summons to look out and not in? Must the individual wither as the world grows more and more? American booksellers report that a new and cheap edition of Brooks's sermons has stimulated a sale in the South and West, but that the normal demand has become very limited. Has the fate of temporariness overtaken even the preaching of Phillips Brooks?

These questions are sufficiently answered by the extraordinary welcome given to Brooks's sermons in a German translation; and it is certainly a suggestive incident in literary history that, while the tide of appreciation has gradually ebbed in England and America, it has risen with suddenness and volume where his name and fame have been quite unknown. It may seem surprising that German readers should not long ago have become familiar with so distinguished a teacher. The barrier of language intervenes, however, more seriously than might be supposed. To a German pastor, for example, the study of Schleiermacher would seem as essential a part of professional training as familiarity with Brooks would appear to an American student; yet the German master is probably quite as unknown to most Americans as the American has hitherto been to Germans. Indeed, among the curiosities of modern literary history must be named the types of American religion which have become most familiar to German readers through translation, and the writers who are generally accepted in Germany as representative of American religious thought. Longfellow, it is true, has long been a household name and Emerson has had large acceptance; but of contemporary American writers concerned with the spiritual life, the translation of whose works has reached from twenty-four to forty editions, the names best known in Germany are those of Ralph Waldo Trine and Oliver Scott Marden.

When, however, one recalls the nature of Phillips Brooks's message, it becomes evident that there is a real kinship between it and the best of German preaching. An American listener in German churches is likely to hear much which is sentimental, pietistic, and hortatory, and to miss the qualities of masculine, intellectual, or ethical appeal. The German pastor usually speaks, as the Apostle said, "to edification, exhortation, and comfort." He is often exuberant and emotional instead of vigorous and cogent. It does not, therefore, surprise an American hearer that the type of preaching most familiar in Germany has reduced many congregations to a mere sprinkling of feminine worshipers. This pastoral sentimentalism is, it must be remembered, the product of centuries of tradition. The preacher is the organ of a State Church, and he may reasonably assume that his hearers have been duly instructed in the elements of Christian faith and duty. The Reformed preacher is,

still further, the heir of homiletical methods derived from the mediæval Church, and the note of authority, and even of priestly condescension, may survive in very radical teaching. Yet this tradition, which may tempt small preachers to substitute feeling for thought, is precisely what has given to the classic types of German preaching qualities which a breezy democracy is likely to miss. The first intimation of revolt from Roman authority was in the preaching of the German Mystics; and that summons of the soul from external conformity to personal communion with God has become the characteristic note of German homiletics. Tauler and Eckart were the spiritual ancestors of Schleiermacher and Krummacker, of Tholuck and Rothe. Spiritual introspection, meditation upon experience, or what may be in general called experimental religion, is as conspicuously the theme of German preaching as practical righteousness and the call to social service are the characteristic themes of the American pulpit.

To this tradition of spirituality derived from mediæval preaching must be further added the tradition of Biblical authority derived from the Reformation. What the Church was to Catholics the Bible became to the Reformers. Textual preaching supplanted the earlier homilies. The problem of the preacher became that of Biblical interpretation; and this habit of Biblical exposition still persists even in preachers whose Biblical criticism is most destructive. Each of these hereditary influences has tended to restrict the scope and aim of German preaching. The strain of mysticism has encouraged sentimental oratory; the Biblical method has reduced many sermons to historical reflections. Yet when these two traditions meet in a great mind there must result great preaching. The Biblical method spiritually interpreted; experimental religion historically reinforced; the present built on the past and the past supporting the present; dogma and ritual forgotten in the supreme desire to renew the spirit of Christ in the experience of the disciple; personal piety mated with ample learning—all this is what one finds in the best utterances of the German pulpit. In Schleiermacher, for example, the most versatile and influential of modern theologians, this fusion of feeling and thought became complete. He was philosopher, historian, professor of theology, and reconstructor of the National Church; but in his preaching he

was the interpreter of experience, the searcher of hearts, the translator of Biblical incidents into their spiritual equivalents. Religion, to Schleiermacher, was neither a way of thinking nor a form of action, but an expression of emotion, a communion with God through Christ, a Christian experience. Preaching was the communication of this experience. As the heart thus uttered itself it reproduced in others the experience which it reports. Preaching; from this point of view, is primarily not doctrinal or even ethical, but emotional. It assumes in hearers the ideals which it expresses and by faith in such experience communicates or creates it. "*Pectus facit predicatorem*" might be its motto. The sermon is not a work of art or a contribution to apologetics, but a liturgical act, a factor in worship, a call to life, as though its single text might be, "Because I live, ye shall live also."

This is the way of preaching which may be in general terms contrasted with the dogmatic and didactic types as suggestive. It opens vistas; it shows a way; it kindles a flame; it suggests a path which experience may take. Suggestion is, on the whole, the preacher's most available instrument. It has not the weight or dignity of the best didactic preaching. The sermons of Bishop Butler, of Liddon or Mozeley in England, of Bushnell, Channing, or Munger in the United States, are contributions to the history of thought, milestones of theological progress; but for immediate effectiveness, for the saving of souls, suggestion is the best use of a half-hour. To undertake the logical demonstration of a great truth is, in the first place, to preach a very long sermon and, in the second place, to run great risk of rousing the objector to protest or denial; but to illustrate and adumbrate, to open the door toward a view, to start the hearer's mind toward an interpretation—that is the natural method for the preaching of personal religion, and of this suggestive method the best German preachers are unrivaled masters. Traces of their influence may be found even in the most distinguished types of English preaching. The sermon of Robertson on Prayer, while wholly original in its detailed analysis and its personal confession, bears almost unmistakeable marks of acquaintance with the equally notable sermon of Schleiermacher on the same text and theme.

When one turns from these observations on German

homiletics to the preaching of Phillips Brooks he recognizes at once a spiritual kinship. Without intimacy with German models Brooks by temperament and intuition belongs to the German school. He was the most suggestive of modern preachers. All his reading, as the extraordinary note-books cited in his biography testify, converged on themes for sermons to be utilized by the method of suggestion. He seldom made a frontal attack upon his subject, but approached it by the strategy of a figure or picture or parable, so that the position was in his hands before its defenders were aware. Instead of making a small theme complicated and abstract, he made a great theme simple and concrete. When a younger preacher expressed his sense of the difficulties of a subject Brooks replied, "We must make it simple"; and that simplicity to which the most difficult theme must be reduced was to him always the simplicity which, as the Apostle's words should be translated, is "toward Christ."

When, therefore, a certain pastor in Lugano discovered for the first time, about four years ago, the sermons of Brooks, he recognized the kinship with the German tradition and proceeded with confidence to arrange a translation of some selected sermons. The first volume was published in 1908, under the title *Ein Ruf in die Höhe*, and the immediate and extraordinary interest which it created led to the publication of a new series in 1911, under the title *Siegeskraft*. Many of the comments of German theologians and pastors on these two volumes are entertaining, both in their appreciation of Brooks and in the opinion prevailing among them of the character of American preaching. A pastor of Basel writes in a Swiss journal:

"The first impression which one receives in the reading of Brooks is one of surprise. We expect from an American something exhilarating and sensational, after the pattern of Henry Ward Beecher, but we find in Brooks a depth, thoroughness, and restraint which are thoroughly German. His sermons, or, as his translator more fitly calls them, his addresses on religion, are no easy reading, and their philosophical discernment and logical development make severe demands on the reader. They are addressed to Christians who think, yet they are thoroughly practical and issue into an earnest appeal to the will."

Another critic writes:

"If we had the impression that American preachers were notable for vulgar and sensational writers, we must now confess that these addresses of Phillips Brooks are both in matter and in force the equals of any

German collection. They are, however, addresses rather than sermons. The text gives a starting-point, a theme which the speaker develops, not from Biblical, but from personal suggestions. History and criticism are subordinated to psychological analysis. It is a book for those who care little for dogmatic or Biblical authority, but are seekers for God."

To the same effect are many other comments in various magazines and reviews. "These sermons have nothing American about them; one seeks in vain for the sensational and eccentric and finds German depth and thoroughness." "These discourses seem to us to lack the simplicity which sermons need, but as spiritual flights through the regions of Christian knowledge, excursions among the hidden workings of the human heart, studies of the life of the soul, they deserve high appreciation." A village pastor goes farther in his estimate. "How much Brooks has meant to me may be measured by the fact that I have learned English in order to read him. There are, I hear, several volumes of his sermons. The one which I have seen presents great, though not insuperable, difficulties. With enthusiasm and a dictionary one may succeed!" Finally, may be added, what is of genuine importance to German readers, the warm appreciation of the German Emperor, communicated in a conversation with Pastor Krummacher, in the course of which the versatile sovereign took occasion also to commend the Noble Lectures in Harvard University on "The Witness to the Influence of Christ," delivered in 1904 by the Lord Bishop of Ripon.

This recognition of Phillips Brooks in a new environment, where the persuasiveness of his presence is unknown and where one critic speaks of him as still living, may go far to justify the reverent admiration of those who have heard and loved him. His place seems to be fixed, not among the preachers who have their day and cease to be, but among those who are not to be forgotten. Changes in American conditions and in ecclesiastical tendencies may make his voice less heard in the street, but that may be the fault of the street rather than of the preacher. If not in the United States, then somewhere else, and some day surely in this country again, the fundamental needs of the human soul will demand satisfaction at the preacher's hands and will find again in Brooks what those who heard him found.

Preaching, like all arts, has an element of periodicity and must use the material of its own time. Monet and

Maeterlinck and Strauss meet the spiritual craving of the present age, which turns from artificiality, superficiality, and conformity to nature, mystery, and power. In the same manner an age dominated by concern for social problems desires to hear in preaching a new note of social redemption. Yet there remains in art a classic style, a best way, a permanent supremacy. Changes of taste or circumstance do not displace Titian or Shakespeare or Beethoven. Back of the periodicity of art is its still more impressive continuity. Temporariness is the fate of all who deal with temporary themes. Even Beecher, the most versatile and inexhaustible of modern preachers, by the dedication of his gifts to the immediate problems of his own time, has now become a figure of the past, an apostle of liberty for the slave and for the Christian, rather than an interpreter of those unchanging spiritual needs which give to teachers so remote from each other as Thomas-à-Kempis and Pascal, Newman and Martineau, a certain timelessness of influence. No one would now think of translating Beecher into German. As for the multitude of less gifted preachers, who regard contemporary life as a sufficient subject and whose sermons become indistinguishable from talks on current events, nothing but temporariness can be anticipated as their destiny. On a single Saturday, taken at random, the announcements of churches in Boston for the next day contained the following subjects, among others, for discourses: "The religion of social service"; "Can a Christian be a rich man?"; "Whiskey, beer, and wine"; "The most striking lessons of the election"; "Are you worth what you cost?" "Standing at Armageddon to fight for the Lord." To pass from this region of bustling sensationalism into the atmosphere of Brooks's preaching is as when the disciples went up from the gossip of Galilee into a high mountain apart, where the great prophets of the past greeted the new Preacher of the Kingdom. On the serene summit of Christian experience the masters of preaching meet; Chrysostom and Augustine, Tauler and Eckart, Robertson and Newman, Schleiermacher and Caird, the goodly company of the prophets who have escaped the fate of temporariness and preach a timeless message; and in this lofty companionship, of different centuries and creeds, there is a place for the generous and guileless genius of Phillips Brooks.

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